

# Modern World History Online

## British colonial rule in Africa, 1850 to 1960

England expanded its role and influence in Africa during the colonial era to become, along with France, a leading colonial power. During the second half of the 19th century Britain dramatically increased its presence on the African continent.

The opening up of Africa to European explorers, traders, and missionaries was made possible in part as a result of steam-powered boats and improved knowledge of waterways in the continent's interior. The availability of quinine as a prophylactic against malaria and the completion of the Suez Canal in 1859 were also factors in this. In large part, Britain's efforts at colonial conquest were intended to replace the slave trade with "legitimate trade." Also, British church leaders hoped that colonial expansion would facilitate the efforts of missionary societies to spread Christianity. However, Britain's imperialist aspirations were also driven to a large extent by the desire to gain greater access to Africa's potential markets and raw materials, as well as to outmaneuver their European colonial competitors.

During the partition of Africa among Europe's leading powers in the 1880s, Britain established formal control over some of the continent's most strategically and economically vital regions. Britain's major colonial holdings ultimately included Egypt and present-day Republic of the Sudan in North Africa; Gold Coast Colony (now Ghana), Nigeria, and Sierra Leone in West Africa; Uganda and Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) in Central Africa; British East Africa (now Kenya) in East Africa; and the Union of South Africa, Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), and Nyasaland (now Malawi) in southern Africa. After the end of World War I (1914–18), Britain also came to control some of Germany's previous colonies, including Tanganyika (now part of Tanzania) and British Togoland.

In administering its African colonial empire, Britain drew upon the philosophy devised by Frederick Lugard (1858–1945) that was put forth as the Dual Mandate. Formulated while Lugard was serving as a colonial administrator, first in Buganda and then in the Sokoto Caliphate in the Northern Region of Nigeria, this approach of indirect rule involved recognition of existing African kings, chiefs, and figures of authority. These indigenous leaders were permitted to rule as long as they recognized British supremacy and maintained certain colonial policies such as tax collection, recruitment into the military, and forced labor details.

The imposition of colonial rule, however, often met with militant resistance by Africans. In the Gold Coast Colony, the Ashanti Empire nearly managed to expel British colonial forces during the Anglo-Ashanti Wars. In southern Africa Zulu soldiers destroyed a British regiment at the Battle of Isandlwana, in 1879, though the resisting Africans eventually lost the Anglo-Zulu War. The Zulus once again challenged British colonial control during the ill-fated Bambatha's Rebellion of 1906–08. The Afrikaner Republics also contested British encroachment, a conflict that culminated in the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902. In all of these instances primary resistance met with failure and highlighted Britain's ability to quell rebellions through its command of advanced weaponry.

Militarily superior, Britain progressively tightened its grip over its African colonies and even established significant British settlements in certain desirable locales, such as Southern Rhodesia and Kenya. However, World War I and World War II (1939–45) had unfavorable impacts on Britain's economy and military capacity. These conflicts also contributed to the momentum of African nationalist organizations that were agitating for greater political power, and, ultimately, independence from colonial rule. The Mau Mau movement in Kenya, which developed during the late 1940s and 1950s, demonstrated the limitations of British colonial power. It also showed the high cost Britain would have to bear if it wanted to maintain its colonial holdings in the face of popular insurrections among its African colonial subjects. This cost increased as Africans educated in Europe and American universities formed a new and increasingly militant group that was unwilling to settle for anything short of complete political autonomy.

Recognizing the inevitability of the loss of its African colonies, by the 1950s Britain took steps to gradually transfer power to the African elites. In 1957 the Gold Coast Colony became the first sub-Saharan colony to attain full independence from Britain. Under the dynamic leadership of Kwame Nkrumah (1909–1972), the country, renamed Ghana, served as an inspiration for the many other African states that achieved independence from Britain in quick succession during the following six years.

### Further Information

Barbara Bush, *Imperialism, Race, and Resistance: Africa and Britain, 1919–1945* (New York: Routledge, 1999)

Trevor Royle, *Winds of Change: The End of Empire in Africa* (London: J. Murray, 1996).

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